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Stories by Alice Munro: "The Office" and "Dolly" Théâtre Adyar, Paris, May 5th, 2015

Performance Review

Corinne Bigot



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Stories by Alice Munro: "The Office" and "Dolly"

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Artistic Team

- 1 Stories by Alice Munro: "The Office" and "Dolly" — Paris Théâtre Adyar, May 5th 2015
Company: Word for Word
Director: Joel Mullennix
Set and Props: Jacquelyn Scott
Costume Designer: Cassandra Carpenter
Lighting Designer: Jim Cave
Sound Designer: Cliff Caruthers
Movement Designer: Andrea Weber
Projection Manager: Jimmy Walden
Word for Word Co-Artistic Designers: Susan Harloe and Lisa Steindler
Cast: Sheila Balter, Jeri Lynn Cohen, Susan Harloe, Paul Finocchiaro, Howard Swain.
<http://zspace.org/w4w>

Review

- 2 Although they are not from Canada, as they admitted to the inquisitive audience during the Q& A session that concluded the show, Word for Word, the company that Susan Harloe and JoAnn Winter co-founded twenty years ago in San Francisco, is already quite familiar with the Canadian short story writer, Alice Munro. They adapted "Friend of My Youth," about fifteen years ago; this time, a year after Munro was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the company chose to return to Munro's work

with a show that cleverly bookends her career. Word for Word staged two stories together: "The Office," from Munro's very first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), and "Dolly," from her last collection, *Dear Life* (2012). The choice is clever as both stories deal with a writer's troubles. With "The Office," Munro offers a variation on Virginia Woolf's essay, *A Room of One's Own*, as the main protagonist, a young wife and mother who is also a writer, rents a room in the hope of finding peace and inspiration, only to see her private room invaded by her nosy landlord. In "Dolly," the life of an elderly couple (a seventy-five year old woman and her husband, an eighty-three-year old poet) is disturbed when the chatty and almost batty saleswoman who turns up on their doorstep turns out to be the poet's former muse. Franklin's most famous poem is never mentioned in rural Ontario where the couple live, since it is too risqué, so he talks about horse-riding instead. Prejudiced views about writing and writers are suggested rather than exposed, while they are more clearly exposed in "The Office."

- 3 The show successfully manages to conjure up the world of Alice Munro's stories, whether it be the confined world of a young housewife and mother who wishes to be a writer and has to face prejudiced visions of women in suburbia of the early sixties, or the world of an elderly couple who talk about their looming death. "The Office" and "Dolly" are first person narratives which makes the narration quite natural when performed. Word for Word prides itself on performing short stories without any cuts. This entails performing both the dialogues, which the actors do with great talent, and the narrative voices, which is no small feat. The narrated passages cleverly serve as preparation for the dialogues, which they seem to set off, while the dialogues illustrate the points the narrative voice is making. As one actor performs the narrative voice, the other actors mimic the actions (watching television) but the narrative voice is not always given to the actor playing the narrator. Any actor can also act as narrator when introducing his or her lines ("he/she said") or describe the actions and reactions he is performing on stage. However, unflattering descriptions of the landlord in "The Office," and of the elderly saleswoman in "Dolly" are voiced by the actress playing the narrator, which is humorous as the characters being described are standing on the stage. Another interesting feature is that these two stories enable the four actors to alternate between major and minor roles (they both have a "couple" as the main protagonists).
- 4 The stage setting is an effectively minimalist, mutable space designed by Jacquelyn Scott. A couple of tables and chairs, a few shelves and a door frame suffice to suggest a house and an office in the first story and, in the second one, a farmhouse, as well as a restaurant and a motel, as a table is cleverly turned into a bed or a car. In "The Office," the actors also conjure up the inanimate objects that adorn the landlord's living room: huge (and, one imagines, hideous) ashtrays through hand gestures, while a picture frame out of which the actors' heads emerge becomes the photograph of the female and male dogs that is being described on stage. These choices give full justice to the story's comic dimension. The show highlights the humor and irony that characterize each story, although we are dealing with different kinds of humor in each one. "The Office" is simply very funny although it is cruel, while in "Dolly," humor is tinged with self-mockery and *gravitas*, with the awareness of looming death.
- 5 In "The Office," the two main actors, Jeri Lynn Cohen (the female writer) and Paul Finocchiaro (the landlord) engage in a vivid and vicious battle, as they fling lines and

phrases such as "he said" at one another, like weapons. At first sight, the old-fashioned clothes that would fit a middle-aged woman appear at odds with the character in Munro's story, a twenty-something mother living in Vancouver in the early sixties, but the brilliant performance given by Jeri Lynn Cohen transcends the costume. She convincingly embodies the frustrations and anger of the young woman who cannot get rid of the nosy landlord because she is too polite. She finds her revenge, the show suggests, in writing up her persecutor, depicting Mr. Malley's mannerisms and voice, and his fondness for clichés. In Munro's story, the portrait of the landlord is as funny as it is cruel, and on stage Paul Finocchiaro is Mr. Malley: unbearably polite and nosy, ingratiating, irritating, needy, pompous, pious and pathetic, all at the same time.

- 6 The second performance, which starts after a short interval, during which there is a change of set (the door frame and the table with the typewriter are replaced by a basic cupboard and a table with chairs to evoke the kitchen in "Dolly"), is characterized by a slower rhythm since the protagonists are all in their seventies and eighties. The humor is also more subtle. The main character is played with subdued gusto by Sheila Balter who manages to let the audience hear her self-mocking tone as she describes her activities (a former teacher, she now writes biographies of *forgotten* Canadian writers), the visitor (a very chatty saleswoman), and her husband (a riding instructor/famous poet). It is through her words and tone that her husband, Franklin, emerges as a rather annoyingly genial and self-confident man, which Howard Swain's performance clearly shows. The narrator's amused reaction to her visitor turns to annoyance and then jealousy when she discovers that Gwen is Dolly, Franklin's torrid old flame (he met her during WWII) and muse (*she* is depicted in the "smutty" poem that brought him fame). Sheila Balter's superb performance suggests that her character may be aware that her decision to leave Franklin is both disproportionate and a means of achieving what she had wished for: something to happen. Surely it is no coincidence that she has bemoaned the fact that the couple are now so old that nothing of importance is ever going to happen to them. More sombre themes such as old age and suicide are also evoked, but with humor rather than pathos.
- 7 In the narrated passages of both performances the actors manage to voice the characters' thoughts, offering the audience a glimpse of the characters' personalities as the actors' intonation conveys emotions such as anger, self-doubt, frustration but also self-mockery. The show illustrates Munro's talent in evoking the little details that make up a person, from their mannerisms to their choice of words. It demonstrates her talent in suggesting her characters' inner lives, and their resilience. Both the young woman in "The Office" and the elderly woman in "Dolly" observe others and themselves with humor and their resilience arises from their self-mocking view of life.
- 8 The show also sets off the oral dimension of Munro's stories, the unique "voices" of her characters, which does not mean a picturesque rural Ontario accent, but instead, people's fondness for clichés betraying prejudiced views, whether it be in rural Ontario or suburban Vancouver. The actors' performances demonstrate that Munro's stories deserve to be read aloud since by emphasizing a word or a brief pause, they let the comic dimension explode. The four actors give life to their characters, but most importantly, they also let us hear every nuance of every sentence, and let the subtler (unspoken) meanings emerge.
- 9 The audience clearly enjoyed the show, although at first sight, it seemed to be a very odd mix, including rather elderly female American expats (the show was under the

patronage of the American Library), Munro fans, high school students and teachers, as well as university students and teachers involved with the French *agrégation* ("The Office" was on the *agrégation* syllabus). Everyone enjoyed the comic dimension of "The Office." The scene where the actors' heads popped out of the frame was greeted with loud laughs, but so was the humorous description of the battle between the writer and the landlord. Reactions to the second piece were more subdued, thus reflecting the change in tone. But the audience did laugh at the wife's goodbye letter and her self-critical analysis of her words and style. The audience also clearly smiled at the description of the elderly couple's struggles with finding the perfect space to kill themselves.

- 10 During the brief Q&A session that followed the performance, the audience did not ask why the company chose to perform stories by Munro, instead they wanted to know why they chose these two stories, and how the choice was made. Susan Harloe, one of the company's co-founders, explained that they read through all of Munro's fourteen collections, trying stories out. The audience were also curious about all the "he said" phrases that peppered the stories: the actors tried them out, in order to see what worked best, Harloe explained. Interestingly, other questions concerned the plots. One woman wished to know whether the actors agreed with her: she thought that the landlord's wife was the one who had scribbled the graffiti in the toilet. The question triggered a debate among the audience, with the actors also voicing their suspicion (the landlord did it). This demonstrated three things. Munro's narrative reticence does invite reader/ audience participation, triggering a need to fill in the blanks. Secondly, the performance had captured the audience's interest. Thirdly, the four actors played their parts so skillfully that the audience considered them Munro experts. Although they denied having such intimate knowledge of the plots, their acting revealed a very subtle understanding of Munro's world.

ABSTRACTS

Theatre review, May 5th 2015

Show: *Stories by Alice Munro: "The Office" and "Dolly"*—May 5th & May 6th 2015

Critique théâtrale, 5 mai 2015

Spectacle: *Stories by Alice Munro "The Office" and "Dolly"*: Théâtre Adyar, Paris 5 et 6 mai 2015

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